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Ministry of Forests and Range

MINISTER WELCOMES FIRE STAFF HOME FROM AUSTRALIA

VANCOUVER – B.C. forest fire specialists returning from a 40-day deployment in Australia have helped raise international awareness of B.C.'s expertise in forest fire fighting, said Forests and Range Minister Rich Coleman today.

"This was the single largest deployment of our experts outside North America, and everyone has returned home safely and with new insights," said Coleman. "This deployment was a huge success. We were able to deliver when our Australian partners needed us during their worst fire season on record. This is what global co-operation is all about."

Since July, when the fire season began in the southeastern Australian State of Victoria, bush fires have burned over 1,186,563 hectares – an area about one-third the size of Vancouver Island. As of Feb. 7, these lightning-caused fires destroyed 51 houses, threatened many communities, and killed 1,700 livestock animals.

"We have been treated exceptionally well by the people of Australia and the emergency service agencies in the State of Victoria," said Bruce Young, who led the B.C. contingent in Australia. "Our team exchanged knowledge, information and technology with our counterparts, and we will look for ways to apply this learning to enhance fire management in B.C."

The 52 B.C. team members have been working alongside their Australian counterparts since their departure from Vancouver Jan. 5. They have been contributing specialist knowledge in planning, operations, fire behaviour analysis, incident command, communications, and initial attack firefighting using helicopters. For the last two weeks, B.C. staff have been deployed at Swifts Creek and Bairnsdale to focus on the massive Great Divide Complex South fire, which was brought under control and contained by Feb. 7.

The deployment was enabled by a co-operation agreement signed recently by B.C. and the Australian wildland firefighting agencies. Costs are being carried by Australia. British Columbia has an active global co-operation program, aimed at continuous improvement in fire management and establishing strong partnerships and goodwill with other fire-prone jurisdictions.

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